The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat

WHAT WORKS?
Research into Practice

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Research Monograph # 16

What can we do as educators to develop and maintain inclusive environments for students with exceptionalities?

Research Tells Us

- The role of the school principal is pivotal in promoting inclusive school cultures.

- The environment and culture of the school setting can have a direct impact on acceptance of students with exceptionalities.

- Including students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom does not have a negative impact on the academic achievement of other students.

- Social benefits accrue to both regular and exeptional students in inclusive settings, among them an increase in advocacy and more tolerant attitudes.

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Including Students with Exceptionalities

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Today's classrooms bring us face to face with the reality that we, as educators, are expected to deal with more diverse student populations than ever before. Within this diverse group are a large number of students with exceptionalities. In the province of Ontario, just under 300,000 students require some sort of special education intervention. Included in this number are not only students who have been identified as exceptional through Identification Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs) but also those who have been given Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Also included are a growing number of students who are considered at risk (although not yet identified as exceptional). Of the students who have been identified as having an exceptionality, just over 80 per cent spend more than half their day within a regular classroom setting.

In 2005, the Ministry of Education released *Education for All: The Report of the Expert Panel on Literacy and Numeracy Instruction for Students with Special Education Needs, Kindergarten to Grade 6.*[1,3] This document, which has as its central focus universal design and differentiated instruction, has been instrumental in laying the foundation for the creation of learning environments that allow all students to have access to effective teaching practices in the regular classroom.

In 2006, the Ministry released *Special Education Transformation: The Report of the Co-Chairs with Recommendations of the Working Table on Special Education.* The report strongly reiterated the notion introduced in *Education for All* – namely, that the regular classroom should continue to be the placement of first choice for students with exceptionalities. While the report acknowledged that full inclusion for some is still a contentious issue, it noted that where segregated settings are deemed necessary, these placements must focus on intervention and have a specific duration.[1]

Currently the Ministry is working on the expansion of *Education for All, K to 12.*

reach every student

Ontario

What are considered "exceptionalities"?

In Ontario, students with exceptionalities are classified within five categories:

- **Behaviour**

- **Communication**
  includes autism, deaf or hard of hearing, language impairment, speech impairment, learning disability

- **Intellectual**
  includes giftedness, mild intellectual disability, developmental disability

- **Physical disability**
  includes blindness, low vision

- **Multiple**
  combination of above

Methods of Classification Differ

Classifications differ across the country, with some locations having no specific categories for exceptionalities.

The Special Education "Debates"

The term *inclusion* is often associated with such terms as *normalization*, *mainstreaming* and *integration*. The move toward its use is perhaps in part due to the imagery projected by the previous terms: images of "allowing" persons with disabilities into the mainstream to normalize them and make them fit, a view much criticized by researchers, educators and individuals with exceptionalities.[3,12,19] Although these terms, particularly mainstreaming and integration, are still present in the research literature, the term inclusion has become increasingly popular both in the literature and in practice.

In the education field, inclusion can have many interpretations. In general, the term relates not just to access but to active and productive involvement. Bunch and Valeo (2004) suggest that, with regard to students with exceptionalities, inclusion means the regular classroom teacher "taking ownership" of all students in his or her class.[3]

Regardless of the definition or description adhered to, inclusion continues to be debated.[7,10,12,22] Some researchers still argue vehemently that the segregation of students into specialized learning environments is essential in order to provide them with the type of individualized instruction that their learning profile suggests would be beneficial.[7] Other researchers argue that to separate students on the basis of ability or other characteristics represents a form of "colonization" that blocks access to a larger learning environment.[12] Many see the segregation of students with exceptionalities as a human rights issue and point to the personal beliefs, administrative barriers and systematic imbedded practices that prohibit educators from practising successful full inclusion of all students regardless of exceptionality.[10,12,18,22]

In the face of a changing worldview on issues of inclusion and diversity, these types of debates tend to focus less on whether or not a student should be included in mainstream schooling and more on how inclusion should be defined and orchestrated.

The Role of the School

Evidence clearly indicates that the environment and culture of the school setting can have a direct impact on the acceptance of students with exceptionalities.[6,11,15] The role of the school principal has been shown to be pivotal for fostering new meaning, promoting inclusive school cultures and instructional programs as well as building relationships between schools and communities.[15] The willingness of administrators to support inclusive environments has been linked to issues of training and experience. There is evidence to suggest that, for administrators, additional training in the area of special education as well as positive experiences with students with exceptionalities are important components for developing and maintaining inclusive environments.[11,15]

A positive attitude toward inclusion has been shown to be the norm among both preservice and practising classroom teachers.[17,23] Factors contributing to this positive attitude include the belief that all students can achieve and the conviction that the classroom teacher can make a difference to student learning.[17,23,25] While there is a demonstrable willingness on the part of teachers to include students with exceptionalities in their classrooms, real concerns remain over lack of training, classroom management issues, general and special education collaboration, as well as a perceived lack of support and resources.[17,18,20,23,25]

Impact of Inclusion on Student Achievement

Educators and parents alike are often concerned about the potential impact that having students with exceptionalities in a classroom might have on the academic achievement of other students. Yet systematic review of the literature over the last 20 years suggests that including students with exceptionalities in the regular classroom does not have a negative impact on the academic achievement of the other students.[5] Interestingly, factors such as socioeconomic status can be more influential than how inclusive the classroom is in determining the overall level of academic success.[1]

Reliable and accurate information on the academic achievement of students with disabilities in inclusive settings can be difficult to obtain due to the variation across disabilities and settings as well as program variations. There is evidence to suggest that at the pre-school level students who are in inclusive settings make greater progress than those in segregated settings.[7] This is especially the case for students who are higher functioning. In teacher ratings of achievement, students with disabilities have been judged to benefit from instruction in inclusive settings.[20] Overall, students in inclusive settings are shown to perform better on academic measures as well as on measures of social competence.[5]

Studies generally note a positive orientation to inclusion both by students with exceptionalities and their peers.[3,11,24] Positive results have been found in terms of an increase in advocacy and more tolerant attitudes on the part of regular students in inclusive settings.[2,4] When it comes to the students themselves, studies report differing results, based on type of disability, type of inclusive setting and age of students. In general, students with exceptionalities who are included in regular classroom settings do not experience serious social difficulties beyond those that would be seen in any other setting.[2,4,24]

Recommended Approaches

1. Examine your own beliefs.

It is important to examine your own belief systems with regard to students with exceptionalities. It may be helpful to ask yourself questions such as, What experiences in my own schooling may have shaped my attitudes toward students with exceptionalities? Do I have a close relationship with a person who would be considered to have exceptionalities? Have I ever been incapacitated in a way that allows me to view my environment differently? These questions may afford you the opportunity to identify ways in which personal beliefs and experiences inform daily practice in both positive and negative ways.

2. Work with the school team, including the student.

While examining our own beliefs is helpful, it is more important to remember that we are not alone; success happens when we work as a team.

Students with exceptionalities often present with complex learning, behavioural and/or physical needs. Planning and implementing programming works best collaboratively. The school's resource teacher, board personnel, parents and other related professionals such as speech and language pathologists can be instrumental in the development of effective programming. Remember to include students with exceptionalities in decision-making so that they have their own voice. Students with exceptionalities are often disempowered by a system in which able-bodied adults make decisions for them.[16] Take some time to discuss with students what works best for their learning and to identify what supports they might need.

Ontario's Bill 82

On December 12, 1980, the Education Amendment Act, commonly known as Bill 82, was signed into law in the province of Ontario. This bill requires boards of education to provide special education services to all students who are in need.

Prior to Bill 82, the provision of services for students with exceptionalities was optional. While most boards in the province did already provide some types of services, the passing of Bill 82 provided access to education for all students regardless of disability.[21]

What is the most influential factor in promoting inclusion?

Educators within a classroom are the most influential factor in promoting successful inclusion within educational settings, not just in classrooms, but in hallways and staffrooms.

References

3. Use a variety of instructional methods, including differentiated instruction and universal design.

When programming for students with exceptionalities use a variety of instructional methodologies that incorporate differentiated instruction and universal design for learning.[13] Be sensitive to external stimuli (hearing, sight), physical space (mobility) and general layout of your classroom. Try to see the environment from a number of perspectives.

4. Extend inclusion to the whole school.

Finally, keep in mind that inclusion is not just about academic programming; it occurs throughout the school. Engage staff, parents, community organizations and the students themselves in ensuring the development of a successful inclusive environment that works well for all students, not just those with exceptionalities.

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